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## A DISPUTATION IN AN ITALIAN NOVEL.

BY MAX RADIN, Newtown High School, New York.

IN connection with President Schechter's article on the Khazars (*JQR.*, New Series, III, 181ff.) the following account of a disputation may have at least the interest of a *curiositas litteraria*.

Jerome Morlini, a Neapolitan jurist, published on April 8, 1520, a collection of Novels in Latin. These do not differ from the many similar collections in Italian and French, except that they are rather less witty and, if anything, more obscene. The style, too, is a curious conglomeration of phrases, a piling of solecism upon euphuism, and the extraordinary book is further disfigured by extremely careless printing.

These vices of substance and form did not, however, prevent the book from becoming a much-coveted prize for bibliophiles as early as the eighteenth century. Finally, in 1799, a certain Pierre Simon Caron prepared a second edition at Paris, which purposed to be an exact reproduction of the first, but which, by gratuitous blunders in reading, succeeded in being much worse.

A very few years later, one E. T. Simon, of Troyes, conceived the plan of a third edition. He intended to revise the text thoroughly, and to add to the eighty-one novels, the fables and the comedy already published, an appendix consisting of 19 new novels. One of these had

already been published in the *Notizia de' Novellieri Italiani* (Bassano 1794) by Count Borromeo, who found it ascribed to Morlini. The other eighteen he claimed to have discovered in a MS. where they were attributed to the Neapolitan jurist.

Simon died before he could carry out his project. His MS. passed into several hands and was finally (1853) purchased by the Municipal Library of Troyes.

In 1855 Morlini was edited for the third time in the *Bibliothèque Elzevierienne* published by P. Jannet. This third edition is the first one that is properly printed. The text has been freed from its obvious errata and all the abbreviated words are printed in full. The editor is very short with Simon's eighteen novels, which he pronounces clumsy forgeries. The decision, to be sure, is based on differences of style, at best a slippery criterion. But whether they are genuine or not, a real service was done in publishing the complete collection, since otherwise the eighteen novels of Simon would have remained inaccessible.

As to the character of the original novels, little need be said. The themes are those that meet us in all the Novellieri—witty retorts, buffooneries, and the inexhaustible *astuzia delle donne*. Morlini, it may be noted, exercised considerable influence upon later writers, who often imitated and translated him.

The novels of the Appendix are, in the main, of the same type. Two, however, vi and xiii, are peculiar. They contain miracles of the Virgin and xiii is especially noteworthy for the fact that in it a Jew suffers both contumely and a beating for his blasphemy. Indeed the novel is an attempt to explain the custom said to exist in Santa Maria Oculatrice near Venosa in the province of Basilicata.

by which any Jew found in the village on Assumption Day (August 15) received a sound beating.<sup>1</sup>

In view of the above, the last novel entitled, *De Judaeo Christiano Mahumeditano et rege*, is particularly remarkable. Summarized it runs as follows.

Three travelers once set out from Tripoli for the Mountains of the Moon, situated at the sources of the Nile. After countless hardships they reached a beautiful region called Oasis. Immediately upon their arrival they were surrounded by a gaping crowd shouting words in an unintelligible tongue. Armed men finally took them in charge and brought them to the King of the country. The latter, wholly unable to understand them, ordered them to be kept, at public expense, for the present.

Meanwhile a royal attendant bethought himself of a resident of Oasis who had come there many years ago, apparently from the same direction as the travelers. This man was immediately summoned and ordered to find out who the strangers were.

Now this man happened to be a Moor from Tunis. After speaking with the travelers, he promptly discovered that they were all three from Tripoli, but that they were of different religions, being a Christian, a Jew and a Mohammedan respectively. The Moor was himself a Mohammedan by birth, but had long lapsed into the idolatry of the other inhabitants of Oasis. Secretly, however, he still favored his old belief and bitterly hated both Jews and Christians. When, therefore, he reported the results of his investigation to the King, he wickedly asserted that the new-comers were dangerous to the state because of

<sup>1</sup> The custom is somewhat like that recorded for Lyon in the fourteenth century.—*Jewish Encyclopedia*, VIII, 259b.

their widely-differing religions. Thereupon the King ordered the travelers to learn the Oasitan language as soon as possible, and commanded his attendants to see to their maintenance.

The travelers obeyed. Instructed by the Moor, they soon succeeded in mastering the language, although they would vastly have preferred to pursue their journey.

When the King thought that they had learned enough for his purpose, he summoned the frightened travelers to him. He conversed with them on frequent occasions and quickly discovered the dogmas of their respective religions and the differences, disagreements, and mutual hatred that reigned in the breasts of all three. Convinced that they never could agree and would make bad citizens of any State or government whatever, he nevertheless decided to try to overcome such obstinacy. He, therefore, called them together and summoned the executioner. Then he ordered every one of them at once, under pain of immediate death, to adopt the religion of one of the other two, and to give in the presence of one another and of the court, the reasons that guided him in his choice.

The Christian spoke first. "Since it is a matter of life and death," he said, "and since the Jewish faith is older than my own and consequently than the Mohammedan, and since the whole Christian religion is derived from the Holy Scriptures handed down by Moses and the ancient prophets, I have no hesitation in adopting the laws of the Jews."

The Mohammedan, calling both Jews and Christians dogs, and reviling them bitterly, declared, nevertheless, that he held the same opinion. He announced that he preferred to be a follower of Moses than of Christ, the God

born of a virgin, and that he held his own life dearer than the Alcoran, because the Bible was older than the latter.

Then the devotee of Moses arose and thus addressed the prince:

“My fate hangs on your nod. Nevertheless, most noble judge, you see the great veneration these men have for my law. Both religions are daughters of Moses, the Prophet. But the father is greater than the daughters. I cannot join the child when the child of its own accord cleaves to my father. It would be both absurd and disloyal on my part. As far as my life is concerned, do whatever seems best to you. I shall continue to adore the God who is the Judge and Sovereign even over you.”

Moved by these words, the King permitted the Jew to retain his faith, dismissed the executioner and distributed many gifts to the travelers. He even permitted them to proceed on their journey if they chose. They preferred, however, to stay there, induced by the delightful climate and the sacred and inviolable blessing of liberty enjoyed by the citizens. They, therefore, pitched their tents there. Soon all the people became converted to Judaism, and the travelers guided King and people in the observance of the holy days, *sub insignibus Synagogae*.

This story teaches that ancient rites are always to be preferred.

How this story, in which the Jew plays a triumphant part, came into this collection side by side with Novel xiii, above mentioned, is difficult to imagine. The substance—an obvious adaptation of the disputation in Judah Halevi’s *Al-Khazari*—could have reached Morlini (if he was the writer) only by oral communication. There were many Spanish Jews and Marannos in Naples after the expulsion

of 1492, and we know that they were effectively protected by the King.<sup>2</sup>

If, however, the novels are a forgery of very much later date, we have not far to look for its source. In 1660 Buxtorf translated the *Al-Khazari* from Hebrew into Latin. After that time, the story of the disputation was common property and may very easily have been adapted into the form here found. The curious circumstance, however, that such a story should be written by a Christian for a Christian audience remains quite without explanation.

<sup>2</sup> The novel of Bandello, Pt. 1, Nov. 32, addressed to Cardinal Lodovico d'Aragone.—*Frate Francesco Spagnuolo volendo cacciar con inganni i Giudei del regno di Napoli e imprigionato.*